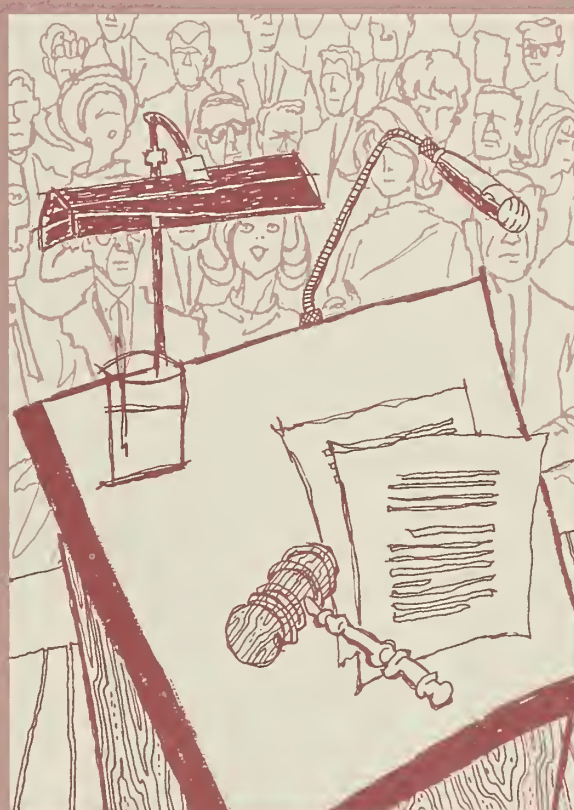


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EXTENSION WORK IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS

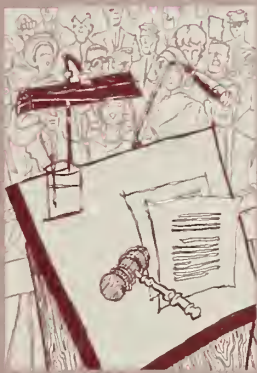


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EXTENSION WORK IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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Cooperative Extension, with its unique organization and special competence, is in a good position to provide objective public affairs education to a large segment of the American public.

Extension work in this area has expanded in recent years. One reason is that farm families and residents of rural communities are increasingly faced with issues requiring people to decide and act as a community. A

democracy needs effective educational programs in public affairs for its citizens.

The Extension Service can take pride in its 20 years of work in public affairs programs. However, as this work has broadened beyond agricultural policy, Extension workers have become less sure of their educational approaches and methods, and also less sure of the justification for Extension effort on some of the problems with which they have been encouraged to work.



WHAT IS PUBLIC AFFAIRS?

The changing situation makes it important to clarify the definition, and provide some guidance for Extension work in public affairs. For a major handicap to Extension accomplishment in this field is confusion about what it is, what it requires, and whose responsibility it is.

Our job is to help people better understand public issues so that they can better reach decisions. *Public* is the key word. It goes beyond the firm or the household; it means more than the membership of a special interest group or organization. It means all the people of a community. Since the issues dealt with are of community-wide concern, this usually means some matter of governmental nature. Therefore, the "community area" of most public affairs issues is usually some governmental jurisdiction or unit such

as an incorporated town, a county, a school district, a watershed district, a metropolitan area, the State, or even the Nation.

Thus, *public affairs* encompasses subjects such as expenditures for public services, school problems, tax policies, land use planning and zoning, improvement of community facilities, analysis of governmental programs, and other such matters.

Public affairs education is treatment of public affairs issues to increase the understanding of people about the problem, alternative courses of action, and probable consequences or other results. It is more than merely Extension work on subjects beyond the farm or home, or through groups, although public affairs education generally involves all this.

Frequently, the educational work on a public affairs subject is done with a variety of special interest groups as audiences in order to inform or involve as many people as possible. However, the subject of this educational work is always a public or community-wide issue. It is the subject that defines public affairs education, not the fact that it may be taught through groups.

"Public policy" implies a more official concept than "public affairs." It usually refers to some already established solution to a public problem or issue. Educational work on policy involves explanation of its content, reasons for it, possible effects, need for change in the policy, and the like. Policy is part of public affairs but not all of it.

Much work in public affairs has been done by State and county Extension services in recent years; for example, work has been done on farm policy alternatives, local government, public education, costs of public services, proposed bond issues, and the like. Much public affairs education has been done without calling it that. It isn't a new field at all, but only one expanding because of new issues arising from socioeconomic changes affecting rural areas.



DECISION – MAKING

Making a decision is a separate process from learning about the subject on which a decision is to be made. Decisions on public issues may be made *individually* in the form of a vote, a reaction letter, a change of attitude, a change of practice, or some other response to the issue. Or individual decisions may be developed in a group, pooled, and made in the name of the group. Individual response is registered as a part of a total response of many people. One may be part of the majority or one of the minority who has registered dissent. The public affairs decision also may be made by an *official body* on behalf of the people.


Frequently, public affairs education is spoken of as that involving “group decisions,” but this definition is too loose or not rigorous enough to be scientific. Groups make many decisions that have nothing to do with public affairs. And conversely, decisions about public affairs are usually made apart from group settings. Although special interest groups may have an interest in some public issue, they usually represent something less than the total community and are generally concerned with matters less than community-wide.

Group decisions are only those in which people decide and act in the name of the group. For example, an organization may vote to have a picnic, and it is conducted in the name of the group. But educational work to help people reach decisions about public issues usually does not involve this kind of group decision at all.

A decision developed in a group setting may turn out to be quite different from the sum of individual decisions. People may

change their minds after hearing discussion and seeing how others are thinking. This is the impact of the teaching, the learning, and the group setting.

What we are saying is that the term “group decision” does not adequately describe public affairs education at all. Rather, the important criterion is whether or not the subject being dealt with is a matter of public or community-wide concern. The actual decisions about it may be reached any-time, in a variety of settings, or expressed in one or more of a variety of ways.



EDUCATION ABOUT THE ISSUES

Public affairs work in Extension is concerned with education about the issues, not the management of decision-making. It may focus on study to help people decide how they will vote on an immediate issue such as a zoning ordinance, school reorganization, or a bond issue. Or it may provide greater understanding about less immediate public matters that will call for eventual attitude and behavior, such as revision of tax structure, costs of government services, or some pending governmental policy.

Extension public affairs education gives objective facts, principles, and explanations about public issues. It helps people understand the factors involved and the consequences of alternative courses of action without presenting a position.

This education may relate to any Extension program. Extension needs to develop the public affairs aspects of all program areas. It is especially a natural starting point for expanding work on resource development and community planning. New work on consumer programs, pesticides, and poverty also may involve one or more public issue aspects from time to time.

The study of public issues develops a social climate of awareness and interest that can form a basis for more intensive work. It develops a common understanding about the facts, common identification of the issues, and common sensitivity and motivation for doing something about them. It can help clarify how to tackle a given problem or undertake a given program.

Many Extension programs on topics such as understanding government operations, the importance of voting, etc., may also be properly classed as public affairs education, provided they are related to underlying issues to be decided by the people concerned. However, it may be better to call some of such education "citizenship."

The same is true of education about the application of given government agricultural policies or programs for farmers as a special-interest audience who will be making individual decisions specifically in relation to the management of the farm. Such educational work is really more accurately described as farm management education than as public affairs education, although public affairs information or analysis might be a part of it.

METHODOLOGY OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS WORK

Method is important in Extension public affairs work. It includes situation analysis, the problem-solving process, objectivity in presenting and handling data or information, involvement of other resources, and *decisions about the subject made apart from Extension*.

The analytical process includes identifying and defining the problem or issue, delineating alternative courses of action, analyzing and weighing these alternatives in terms of their consequences, and obtaining public understanding. Then an informed public can decide and act according to its own values and goals. Sometimes the problem-solving process is thought of as a recent product of social scientists, but actually John Dewey first developed these steps in his book, *How We*

Think, published in 1933.

Public affairs education and action may involve the total population, but often a subgroup must act on behalf of all concerned. Thus, frequently the audiences for public affairs education are people of specific policy-making and leadership groups. They might be school boards, county officials, farm organization leaders, economic development committees, leaders in women's organizations, or civic groups. Educational information may also be provided the general population through mass media.

Since problems of rural people recently have tended to center around economic and social subjects, the Extension public affairs leader is often a person having considerable

training in economics and sociology, and attached academically to agricultural economics or rural sociology. He may have the title of Extension economist or sociologist. These specialists are particularly qualified and may be especially helpful in dealing with the public issue aspects of various program areas.

The "staff team" idea has come into increased use in recent years in public affairs work; for a given public affairs problem may call for treatment from several disciplines. The leader in this work cannot be expected to provide all the public affairs subject matter for all programs, but he can provide a lot of it for some issues, and he can provide the public problem-solving process essential to treating any issue in any program.

One might conclude that it is not necessarily essential, or even desirable, to have a staff position called "public affairs specialist." The term "agricultural policy" probably is more definitive and desirable for public affairs work of farm management nature. On the other hand, staff positions concerned with public affairs might be titled "agricultural economist, public affairs," or "social scientists, public affairs." The main point is that staff assistance in public affairs needs to be provided and designated as such to serve as a "generalist" resource and to help with public affairs education for all Extension. While it is not a science discipline in itself, it is a specific program leadership role, requiring scientific attitude and ability to use scientific problem-solving methodology.

Any Extension program from time to time may involve matters of public issue. Any staff member may find himself concerned with some educational work about public affairs. The important thing is to recognize when you are facing a public affairs problem, then to draw on the "public affairs specialist," who can help you on the methodology, including involvement of the resource people who may be essential to doing a good job.



KEYSTONES OF SUCCESS

Objectivity is crucial in public affairs education. Objectivity simply means (1) considering all sides of a case without bias, (2) studying it accordingly with the people, and (3) refraining from injecting your personal opinion to influence group opinion or action on the subject. Objectivity does not mean refraining from having any belief about the subject, but it does mean being able to see all sides of a matter and helping other people to do the same.

Use the problem-solving process. State the true problem, study facts pertaining to it, identify alternative solutions, and analyze them. Study the causes behind problems and the economic and social consequences of alternative solutions. Purposely plan for objective discussion. This means using one or more techniques that will provide effective discussion in the teaching situation, and having adequate resource information available. Aim to have any summarization be in terms of the teachings or findings, rather than in terms of conclusions or recommendations; for it's the latter that often leads into further trouble.

It is not necessary to reach "yes" or "no" decisions in public affairs education. In fact, try to avoid having audiences reach decisions during Extension education situations. Your purpose is not to reach decisions, but to help people understand the pros and cons of alternative courses of action so that later they can better make their own decisions as individuals. People may differ in their decisions, even if given the same facts, because of different situations, values, and goals.

Start with the problem, not the solution. For example, take the issues of forming a community development corporation, school consolidation, or developing a community college. These are not problems, but proposed solutions to conditions needing correction.

Look at the general problem and the problem locally. Take care to identify the real problem and state it clearly. What are the causes? Examine alternatives—their consequences and benefits. The need for solution may be great, but it is equally important that the people be helped to study the issue before reaching their own decisions. Once a solution is accepted, perhaps even the one originally proposed, they will then implement it with greater enthusiasm.

Some Extension workers hesitate to engage in public affairs education because they say "It gets into controversial subjects, and Extension is not supposed to become involved in controversial issues." Such a view can be appreciated, but Extension education limited to the purely noncontroversial would be a long way from fulfilling our educational responsibility to the people. Sometimes big issues affecting the well-being of people are

at stake. But timeliness or appropriateness is always a factor that has to be considered.

The dedicated Extension worker does not sit idly by, content with traditional "safe" Extension work, and deny the assistance of the University and other resources to the people. Many things that Extension has worked on through the years may have been controversial at some time or other, even the idea of having a county agent in the first place. On the other hand, not all public affairs issues are controversial. On many issues, educational work is readily or already accepted. The job is mainly a matter of helping people become better informed or prepared for making the decisions ahead.

The controversy in discussion of given public issues frequently arises more from personal or group factors involved than from the subject. Therefore, always endeavor to discuss *what* is right, not *who* is right.

Objectivity, true problem situation analysis and problem-solving process are concepts that help us work effectively on any and all types of problems or programs. These are tools that help us keep our education work properly focused and objective. They are also the tools of the scientist.



Cooperative Extension Work: United States Department of Agriculture and State Land-Grant Universities Cooperating. August 1969